

The Semantics of Nicknames of the American Presidents

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1. Introduction

Nicknames as optional and transient terms of address and reference can provide insights into social relationships, culture and language (De Klerk and Bosch 1997:101). The nickname captures a characteristic of a person if it seems relevant to the name-giver. When an additional name is given to a political leader of the country it means that the reason for naming is considered to be important in the public opinion. The study of “official” or “public” nicknames of American presidents can reveal cultural assumptions and stereotypes of the country’s political leader existing in the American society.

This study is focused on the recorded public nicknames of the American presidents, which were collected from onomastic dictionaries, reference literature on American presidents, and the Internet. The data constituted the approximate amount of 430 nicknames for 43 presidents.

Nicknames have a wide distribution in the American society (Shankle 1955:vi). They are commonly used in political discourse to refer to political leaders, especially US presidents. When a nickname is used instead of the real name of the president, it evokes a set of associations about the president’s character or actions, and reveals the attitude of the speaker. The political sphere of communication being highly competitive, it uses nicknames as a tool of influence. They serve as a sharp and quick way of labeling someone, creating an image of the named person, both by opponents and supporters.

Analyzing the present condition of the study of nicknames in onomastics, Theodore Holland Jr. writes that when studying nicknames a researcher should construct a “psychologically real” model of nicknames. He points out that “the importance of obtaining a “psychologically real” model is that such a model does more than merely order the data under investigation, it provides a description of semantic characteristics which is culturally revealing” (Holland 1990:267). Thus, nicknames should be studied in terms of their semantic structure to be able to reveal cultural models determining their coining. In this paper semantic components of nicknames will be represented in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) that has been developed by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues in the last 30 years¹ (Wierzbicka 1996, Goddard 1998, Goddard and Wierzbicka (eds) 1994, 2002). It consists of 60-odd lexical universals, which are governed by a grammar of “combinability” (Wierzbicka 1996:112). It is a universal way to describe meaning that can avoid obscurity and circularity as well as ethno-centric point of view. As this study aims at describing the semantic structure of nicknames, as well as cultural assumptions underlying their usage, the NSM method can be considered to be an adequate tool for these purposes. It should be noted, though, that this study has to deal with several cultural concepts that are crucial in explication of the studied phenomena. Thus, for convenience to avoid lengthy

explications words like “country”, “President”, “child”, “speak”, “we”, are used, although they are not universal primes. These “semantic molecules” (Goddard 1998:254) can be explicated separately in terms of the universals.

2. Semantic structure of nicknames

The question of what constitutes a name and a nickname is often debated in onomastics (Dickson 1996, Dunkling 1995, Holland 1990, Shook 1994). It would be too time-consuming to discuss this issue here at length, so for the purpose of this study by a nickname we will mean a person’s alternative name, which people know is not the person’s real name. This paper deals with any form of reference to the President, which is not official, but which is recognized and used by other people. Thus, it considers short forms of first names (like *Ike* or *Dicky*) and title-like forms (like *The Father of Our Country*) as nicknames.

When a nickname is used in discourse instead of the official name of a person it carries some meaning as well as expressional value. How can this meaning and expression be represented? The analysis of two nicknames, *The Father of Our Country* (1) for George Washington and *Ike* (2) for Dwight Eisenhower, will help to distinguish their semantic components. These two nicknames are chosen due to their different character.

2.1. The Father of His Country (George Washington)

The most famous nickname of George Washington, the first US president (1789-1797), is *The Father of Our Country*. He got this nickname because almost single-handedly he created a new government—shaping its institutions, offices, and political practices that have continued for more than two centuries. He brought together the country and became an example to follow for future generations (Whitney 1991).

When this nickname is used instead of the real name it evokes associations of people with his outstanding service for the country. This understanding can be explained in NSM in the following way:

- (1a) *The Father of Our Country* (*George Washington*)
- (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) a long time ago X did many good things for this country
 - (c) no one else did things like this before
 - (d) no one else could do things like this after
 - (e) because X did these things,
this country can exist
 - (f) it is good if we think about what this person did

This formula describes the motive for coining the nickname – the characteristics of the named person and their evaluation from the point of view of the speaker. The components (b-d) refer to the uniqueness of Washington’s deeds, (e) – to the “fatherly” character of his actions, (f) – the importance of appreciation of his deeds by the public. These are referential (a-e) and evaluative (f) semantic components. When this nickname is used instead of the real name, it reveals the speaker’s attitude, a special manner of expression –

some kind of respect to a person of a higher status than the speaker. This manner of expression can be explicated in the following way:

- (1b) (g) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (h) this person is not like other people because this person can do many good things other people cannot do things like this
 - (i) I feel something good toward this person

These components describe a respectful attitude toward a person of a higher status.

The nickname “The Father of Our Country” has the following components:

- (1) *The Father of Our Country (George Washington)*
 - (a) I think about X like this:
 - (b) a long time ago X did many good things for this country
 - (c) no one else did things like this before
 - (d) no one else could do things like this after
 - (e) because X did these things, our country can exist
 - (f) it is good if we think about what this person did
 - (g) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (h) this person is not like other people because this person can do many good things other people cannot do things like this
 - (i) I feel something good toward this person

2.2. Ike (Dwight D. Eisenhower)

Dwight D. Eisenhower, thirty-fourth US president (1953-61), was commonly referred to as *Ike*. I would suggest the following explication of this nickname:

- (2) *Ike (Dwight D. Eisenhower)*
 - (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) this person’s name is something like “Ike”
 - (c) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (d) I know this person well
 - (e) this person is someone like me
 - (f) I feel something good toward this person

In this nickname the usage of the short form of the first name suggests the following components of the expressive part of meaning: familiarity with the named person (d), equal status of the named person and the speaker (e), positive feeling (g), which is based on the form of his name.

2.3. Semantic components of the nicknames of the American Presidents

The possible constituents of the semantic structure of nicknames are referential (like components (a-f) in the nickname “The Father of Our Country” and (a-b) in “Ike”) and expressive (components (g-i) in “The Father of Our Country” and (c-f) in “Ike”). The referential component serves as a means of identification and, as a rule, refers to a salient characteristic or deed of a person. The referential part might include individual or social evaluation as one of the components. The expressive component – reveals the attitude of the speaker to the named person with the following possible elements: degree of familiarity between the speaker and the named person, status – the named person viewed as equal, superior or below, emotional attitude – a kind of feeling the speaker has towards the named person.

As soon as the semantic components of nicknames become clear, it is possible to discuss cultural information hidden in nicknames. The referential part can reveal what characteristics of presidents become noticed in public opinion and how they are evaluated. The manner of expression can tell us about the way people refer to the president – whether they want to speak about him as being equal or higher in status, someone they know well or someone they don’t know well and feel respect for.

3. The expressive value of nicknames with short forms of first names and initials

Some nicknames use forms of personal names, which help to create a special attitude towards the named person. Expressive value of nicknames differs according to the form of a personal name used in it. It is based on the possibility of personal names to have different expressive value (Wierzbicka 1992:229). I will analyze nicknames with initials and short forms of names applying the classification of personal names by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1992, 230-231). I will use two groups of short names from this classification – so called “standard short forms” (e. g. Zach for Zachary, Abe for Abraham) and “child-oriented short forms” (e. g. Jamie for James, Willie for William).

3.1. Nicknames with short forms of first names

The usage of short forms of first names in discourse implies a high degree of familiarity between the speaker and the named person, this person is viewed as equal or below the speaker. There is an evident difference in evaluative and expressive value of nicknames using standard short forms and child-like forms.

Nicknames, that are based on short forms of first names, have positive evaluation and always go with positive adjectives:

- Old Zach (Zachary Taylor)
- Handsome Frank (Franklin Pierce)
- Honest Abe, Uncle Abe, Old Abe (Abraham Lincoln)
- Our Chet (Chester Allan Arthur)
- Peaceful Bill, Smiling Bill, Big Bill (William H. Taft)

In the collected data there was not found an instance of a pejorative adjective combined with this form of a name.

The usage of this form implies familiarity between the speaker and the person referred to, and positive emotional attitude of the speaker. This kind of attitude can be explicated in the following way:

- (3) *The expressive value of nicknames with STANDARD SHORT FORM (Honest Abe):*
- (a) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (b) I know this person very well
 - (c) this person is someone like me
 - (d) I feel something good toward this person

3.2. Nicknames with child-oriented short forms of address

Child-like -y/-ie forms are used in nicknames of presidents of negative connotation only:

- Little Jamie (James Madison)
- Mischievous Andy / Mischie-Andy (Andrew Jackson)
- Ten-cent Jimmy (James Buchanan for the introduction of low tariffs and salaries)
- King Andy, Andy the Sot, Plebian Andy, Andy Veto (Andrew Jackson)
- Wobbly Willie (William McKinley)
- Teddy the Meddler, Terrible Teddy (Theodore Roosevelt)
- Tricky Dicky (Richard Nixon)
- Jerry the Jerk (Gerald Ford)
- Slick Willie (Bill Clinton)

Usage of a child-like name reflects a negative attitude because a childish behavior is inappropriate for a politician.

- (4) *The expressive value of nicknames with CHILD-ORIENTED SHORT FORMS (Tricky Dicky)*
- (a) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (b) I know this person very well
 - (c) I feel something bad toward this person like people feel toward a child when this child does something bad

On the basis of these examples it is possible to state that different forms of personal names do differ in their expressive value. Standard short forms due to their positive value combine with adjectives of positive evaluation (Handsome or Honest), while child-oriented forms are used with negative quantifiers (Ten-Cent or Meddler). Hypothetically, the adjective could be neutral, and yet, depending on whether the name-form is standard or child-oriented, the overall effect would be positive or negative (e.g., Big Bill sounds more positive than Big Billy, Old Abe more positive than Old Abie).

3.3. Initials used in nicknames

Three of the presidents were commonly referred to by their initials: Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK), Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ). These presidents possessed high degree of popularity from the public for their political

achievements. These short forms of reference became widely used, and it is difficult to find cases of the use of this form with a negative determiner. So, it rather would be used positively.

When a speaker uses initials or abbreviations s/he implies that the audience is aware of what these letters stand for and shares a similar attitude towards the “encoded” person.

- (5) *The expressive value of nicknames with INITIALS (JFK)*
- (a) I want to speak about X the way people speak about someone if they think about this person like this:
 - (b) all people in this country know this person
 - (c) I am one of these people
 - (d) if I say “JFK”,
 - (e) all people in this country will know the person I am thinking of
 - (f) I don’t have to say more
 - (g) I know that many people feel something good towards this person

The most common nickname of the present US President George W. Bush – *W* or *Dubya* (as pronounced by him with Texan accent) does not fully suit this category. It uses the initial for his middle name to refer to his Texan origin and the fact of his being the son of the forty-first president George Bush. So, there is more meaning in it than in the described nicknames. It is not as positive as JFK, for example, but still quite friendly and indulgent.

4. Cultural values reflected in nicknames

Nicknames serve a purpose of labeling someone by his/her distinguished characteristic. “Nicknames highlight deviations from normality and, as a corollary, indicate the accepted aspects of that society” (Morgan et al. 1979:69). There is polarity in the types of nicknames: those with positive connotations are, as a rule, given by supporters of the president, negative ones are given by opponents. In both cases nicknames are created to influence public opinion, and they rely on the values and assumptions shared by members of the society. Otherwise, they would not serve this function of influence. Thus, nicknames of presidents can be considered to be keys to understanding of cultural values at a particular time in history.

From the analyzed corpus of nicknames it is possible to distinguish several groups of nicknames, each group being governed by similar cultural assumptions. It is not by chance if one and the same characteristic gets reflected in nicknames of several presidents - it indicates the importance of this feature to the public. These groups were distinguished if nicknames were coined by similar motives (i.e. appeared due to the attention to a similar characteristic or action). Sometimes nicknames within each group exhibit similar patterns of naming, but this feature was not considered as a distinguishing one. The NSM method will be applied to describe the assumptions that can be inferred from each group of nicknames. Each of the group gets a conventional name, but the explication used does not intend to explain this name, but the cultural assumption used to form a nickname of this kind. There are two main reasons for formulating these assumptions in simple and universal terms rather than associating them with particular concepts directly. The first reason is that cultural concepts, like those of a hero or a self-made man, undergo changes throughout the history of the country. The nicknames of presidents cannot be used to exhaustively document these changes, but they do provide clues to understanding and

explaining these concepts. Second, in the naming process the namer does not have this concept or particular word in mind, but rather relies on some values and ideas connected with that concept.

Due to limits of space only three cultural assumptions with the labels of “Self-made Man”, “Undeserved Leader”, “Politicians influenced by others” are discussed here. Other assumptions distinguished, but not dealt with here are: “Hero”, “Founding Father”, “Wise Person”, “Man Serving for People”, “Good Orator”, “Person Not Able to Fulfill Promises”, “Silent Politician”, “King”, “Buddy”.

4.1. “Self-made man”

This group of nicknames consists mostly of nicknames describing occupation of presidents before the time of presidency:

- The Surveyor President, The Farmer President (George Washington)
- The Farmer President, Log Cabin Candidate/President (William Harrison)
- The Wool-carder President (Millard Fillmore)
- The Rail Splitter, The Flatboatman (Abraham Lincoln)
- The Canal Boy, Boatman Jim, Plow Boy of Ohio, Last of the Log Cabin Presidents, The Teacher President (James Garfield)
- The Peanut President (James Carter).

These nicknames were coined on the basis of a popular idea of a self-made man – a man, whose achievements are due to his hard work. Usually these nicknames were used in election campaigns to support the candidate. There is no positive evaluation in the words used in these nicknames, but they definitely have some common belief standing behind them that it is good if a person achieves his status in life independently, by consistent work, making a way from obscurity to an honored position in the society.

The assumption underlying these names can be formulated in the following way:

- (6)
 - (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) some time ago, X did many things
 - (c) many people in this country did things like this
 - (d) because of this, many people could think:
 - (e) this person is someone like me
 - (f) X did these things well
 - (g) after this, because of this X could do many other good things
 - (h) because of this, people knew: X can do many good things now
 - (i) when people think like this about a person
 - they think something good about this person

4.2. “Undeserved leader “

One pattern of naming is repeated several times when a president gets his position due to the death of his precedent and acquires the nickname “The Accidental President” or “His Accidency”. Presidents get pejorative nicknames of this type as well when their victory at the elections is controversial.

The Accidental President, His Accidenty (John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Chester Arthur took the office after the death of the predecessor; John Q. Adams and Grover Cleveland got these nicknames as well because their victories in the elections were controversial)

Old Eight to Seven, The Dark Horse, The Fraud President, The President de facto, His Fraudulency, Great Unknown (Rutherford Hayes won the presidency in 1876 against Democratic candidate Samuel Jones Tilden within such a narrow margin and on such shaky grounds.)

President – Select, The Never-Elected President, Unelected Fraud, Minority President (George W. Bush)

The cultural assumption for these nicknames can be formulated in the following way:

- (7)
 - (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) in this country often a person becomes a president if many people in this country think: “we want this to happen”
 - (c) X became president not because people wanted it
 - (d) it happened because something else happened
 - (e) people didn’t think that if this other thing happens, X will become president
 - (f) when people think like this about a person they think something bad about this person

4.3. “Politician influenced by others”

Some presidents get promoted in their political careers due to the support of other former presidents. Their nicknames reflect the idea that the named president is another president’s follower, protégé or relative, and his name is associated with the name of another president.

The general assumption of this kind of nicknames can be formulated in the following way:

- (8)
 - (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) when someone thinks about X, this someone cannot not think about another president before X (Y)
 - (c) because Y did many good things for X
 - (d) X is President because of this
 - (e) many people can know it

Nicknames of this type can be coined for different purposes. Some nicknames show that X’s predecessor was a good president and that his follower is or will be as good as his predecessor:

Young Tippecanoe (John Tyler – became President after William Harrison’s death. Tippecanoe – the most well-known Harrison’s nickname)

Young Hickory (James Polk – came to the presidency as the protégé of Andrew Jackson (Old Hickory))

Young Hickory of the Granite Hills (Franklin Pierce received a commission from James Polk (Young Hickory) in February 1847 as a colonel in the volunteer army to fight in the Mexican War)

Young Tippecanoe (Benjamin Harrison – a grandson of William Harrison, Tippecanoe).

In case of these nicknames the assumption will be the following:

- (9)
- (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) when someone thinks about X,
this someone cannot not think about another president before X (Y)
 - (c) because Y did many good things for X
 - (d) X is President because of this
 - (e) many people can know it
 - (f) Y did many good things for people
 - (g) because of this, people can think:
X will do many good things for people
 - (h) it will be good if X does good things for people

Another pattern will be used to underline the idea that the named president is not as good as his predecessor:

James the Lesser, James the Second (James Monroe – compared with his predecessor James Madison)
Son of His Grandfather, Grandfather's Hat (Benjamin Harrison – his grandfather William Harrison was the ninth US President)

This assumption will be the following:

- (10)
- (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) when someone thinks about X,
this someone cannot not think about another president before X (Y)
 - (c) because Y did many good things for X
 - (d) X is President because of this
 - (e) many people can know it
 - (f) Y did many good things for people
 - (g) X cannot do these good things
 - (h) because of this, people can think something bad about X

Another pattern can be used by opponents to show that the new president will be as bad as his "patron" like in the following examples:

John the Second, King John the Second (John Quincy Adams – son of John Adams, second US President)
King Martin the First (Martin Van Buren – allusion to the nickname of Andrew Jackson "King Andrew the First". Van Buren was elected on the strength of Jackson's popularity).

The assumption for these nicknames can be the following:

- (11)
- (a) people think about X like this:
 - (b) when someone thinks about X,
this someone cannot not think about another president before X (Y)
 - (c) because Y did many good things for X

- (d) X is President because of this
- (e) many people can know it
- (f) Y did some bad things for people
- (g) because of this, people can think:
X will do some bad things for people

These three concepts can be considered “polar”: they reflect important cultural assumptions in the American society that it is good when a person achieves everything in his/her life by persistent work independently and it is bad if someone else does things for a person. The categories of “Politician influenced by others” in its third variant (11) and the “Underserved Leader” (7) can be considered anti-categories of the “Self-made man” (6).

5. Conclusion

Political discourse in the USA is characterized by high productivity of coining nicknames for the US presidents.

The semantic structure of nicknames can be explicated with lexical universals to make their meaning transparent and avoid a culture-biased analysis. The semantic analysis of nicknames can give clues to cultural values and assumptions determining their coining.

The semantic structures of nicknames contain referential and expressive components. The referential components of nicknames can be evaluative. The expressive components are complex and can include emotive components, and the components of status and familiarity.

Nicknames differ in their expressive value, and their variety depends on the forms of personal names used in nicknames.

It is possible to divide the nicknames examined here into several groups according to the cultural assumptions underlying their coining.

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Notes

¹ The list of the NSM semantic primes (in Goddard and Wierzbicka (eds) 2002)

Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY
Evaluators: GOOD, BAD
Descriptors: BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events and movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession: THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death: LIVE, DIE
Time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifiers, augmentor: VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy: KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity: LIKE

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